

# Brand (in)fidelity: When Flirting with the Competition Strengthens Brand Relationships

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Accepted by Amna Kirmani, Editor; Associate Editor, Meng Zhang

We document the existence and consequences of brand flirting: a short-lived experience in which a consumer engages with and/or indulges in the alluring qualities of a brand without committing to it. We propose that brand flirting is exciting, and that when consumers flirt with a brand other than their typically preferred brand in the same product category, they can transfer this excitement to their preferred brand—resulting in even greater love and desire for it. Consistent with this conceptual account, we demonstrate that this brand flirting effect is mediated by excitement. Moreover, the brand flirting effect is most likely to emerge under conditions that facilitate arousal transfer: when consumers are highly committed to their preferred brand, and when the brand with which consumers flirt is similar to their preferred brand.

**Keywords** Brand flirting; Commitment; Brand relationships

Marketers frequently give consumers product samples, offer them price reductions, and inundate them with advertisements in hopes of luring them away from competitors. Moreover, consumers often browse, daydream about, and have positive interactions with a variety of products. We investigate the effect of such fleeting appreciation of competing brands on consumers in committed brand relationships—that is, relationships in which a consumer is loyal to a brand and is committed to buying the brand in the future (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Lastovicka & Gardner, 1979). What happens when consumers who are committed to one brand flirt with—briefly admire or enjoy sampling—a competing brand? Although conventional wisdom suggests that a positive encounter with a competing brand could decrease consumers' loyalty to a previously preferred brand (Keaveney, 1995; Oliver, 1999), we argue that when consumers are highly committed

to their preferred brand, flirting with other brands can ironically benefit their relationship with “their” brand.

Using interpersonal relationships as a metaphor (Fournier, 1998), and based on an analysis of consumers' everyday experiences (pilot studies 1–2), we define “brand flirting” as an experience that satisfies each of three criteria: (a) Consumers appreciate a brand's alluring qualities by either engaging with these qualities (e.g., by considering the alluring qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) and/or actually indulging in these qualities (e.g., using or consuming the brand); (b) This experience is short-lived; (c) Consumers have no commitment to this brand. We find that brand flirting occurs in a variety of ways—from appreciating a brand's alluring features without acting on this appreciation (akin to being attracted to the alluring features of a new person), to using a product and having a pleasant short-lived experience with it (akin to enjoying a drink with that new person).

The current research is the first to document brand flirting, identify its characteristics, and examine the effect of flirting with competing brands (i.e., brands that compete with a

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Received 3 August 2015; accepted 21 July 2017

Available online 27 October 2017

This work was funded by National Funds through FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the project Ref. UID/ECO/00124/2013 and by POR Lisboa under the project LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722.

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DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1011

consumer's preferred brand) on consumers' committed brand relationships. In this research, we use the term "preferred brand" to refer to the brand which consumers typically prefer in a particular product category. Consumers vary in the extent to which they are committed to their preferred brand (e.g., Gill, Grossbart, & Laczniak, 1988; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973).

### The Impact of Flirting on Committed Relationships

There is significant overlap in the manner in which consumers form relationships with brands and people (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998), and similar antecedents predict brand and interpersonal loyalty (Li & Petrick, 2008); thus, our conceptual account is rooted in the interpersonal relationship literature. Previous research reveals that the absence of attractive alternatives is a key determinant of relationship maintenance (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Levinger, 1965; Rusbult, 1980). Indeed, the availability of attractive alternatives reduces commitment to one's current relationship partner and increases the risk of relationship dissolution, as does attention to alternatives (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Femlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Jemmott, Ashby, & Lindenfeld, 1989; Miller, 1997; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Simpson, 1987). Thus, committed partners use a wide array of cognitive and behavioral strategies to protect their relationships. For example, they devalue the attractiveness of alternatives and pay less attention to them (Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2008). Although commitment to a relationship partner can ward off temptations, committed individuals still sometimes flirt with attractive others (Ritter, Karremans, & van Schie, 2010).

We theorize that flirting is likely to be frequent in the domain of brand relationships just as it is in the domain of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, contrary to the possibility that brand flirting undermines committed brand relationships, we predict that flirting with a brand other than a consumer's preferred brand in a particular product category can cause individuals in committed brand relationships to increase their love for their preferred brand and their desire to consume it. We propose that the excitement induced by flirting with other brands can ironically be transferred to the consumer's preferred brand, increasing committed consumers' love for "their" brand and their anticipated consumption of it.

### Conceptual Development

Flirting with attractive others elicits excitement (i.e., positive arousal; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Henningsen, 2004). Flirting with brands may also elicit excitement, as using or admiring a brand other than a preferred one may be a novel and pleasantly arousing experience. In contrast, habituation decreases excitement in both interpersonal relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Finkel et al., 2015; Huesmann, 1980) and brand relationships (Reimann, Castaño, Zaichkowsky, & Bechara, 2011). Indeed, new and brief brand relationships can induce more arousal than do stable brand relationships (Alvarez & Fournier, 2012). Drawing on this literature, we predict that flirting with brands similarly elicits excitement. We propose that this positive arousal can have ironic effects on consumers' relationship with their preferred brand.

Arousal is an effective response that can "disperse, scatter, permeate, combine, fuse, spillover and become attached to totally unrelated stimuli" (Murphy, Monahan, & Zajonc, 1995). In other words, people often transfer arousal from the source that elicited it to another target (e.g., Winkielman, Berridge, & Wilbarger, 2005). This transfer amplifies affective responses to the target, even when that target is unrelated to the arousal's source (Dutton & Aron, 1974). Arousal is most likely to be transferred to a target when that target is salient (i.e., active in consumers' minds when the arousal is experienced; Jones, Fazio, & Olson, 2009; Sinclair, Hoffman, Mark, Martin, & Pickering, 1994). Arousal transfer processes occur not only when stimuli are in the immediate external environment, but also when they are simply cognitively accessible (Sinclair et al., 1994).

Building on this research, we theorize that flirting-induced arousal can be transferred to a cognitively accessible preferred brand. We theorize that two factors moderate the likelihood that flirting-induced arousal will be transferred to a consumer's preferred brand: the consumer's commitment to their preferred brand, and the similarity between the consumer's preferred brand and the brand with which the consumer flirts.

First, we predict that flirting-induced arousal is more likely to be transferred to a consumer's preferred brand when the consumer is more committed to that brand. Because preferred brands are more cognitively accessible among individuals in more (vs. less) committed brand relationships (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Park, MacInnis,

Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), and because arousal is more often transferred to more (vs. less) cognitively accessible targets (Jones et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 1994), we hypothesize that more committed consumers are more likely to transfer arousal from flirting with a competing brand to their preferred brand. Moreover, because people are more attracted to attractive targets when they transfer arousal to them (Dutton & Aron, 1974), we predict that this transfer increases committed consumers' love and desire for (e.g., anticipated consumption of) their preferred brand.

Second, arousal is more likely to be transferred to a particular target when it is difficult to tease apart the source of the arousal and the target (Jones et al., 2009; Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005). Similarity between source and target causes source confusability (Henkel & Franklin, 1998; Johnson, Foley, & Leach, 1988); arousal is thus more likely to be transferred from a source to a target when the source and the target are similar (Andersen & Berk, 1998; Kruglanski & Pierro, 2008). Thus, we predict that a second key factor that increases the likelihood that flirting-induced arousal is transferred to a consumer's preferred brand is the similarity between the source of the arousal (i.e., flirting) and the preferred brand. In sum, we propose and test the following hypotheses:

H1: The brand flirting effect occurs when flirting with an alternative brand causes consumers to have greater love for, and to more greatly desire, their preferred brand.

H2: The brand flirting effect occurs through the process of arousal transfer: brand flirting induces excitement (i.e., positive arousal) that can be transferred to a brand to which a consumer is committed.

H3: The brand flirting effect is more likely to occur among committed consumers, and when the preferred brand and the competitor's brand are similar.

### Overview

We document the existence and scope of brand flirting in three pilot studies, and examine the consequences of brand flirting on committed brand

relationships in three experiments. Pilot studies 1–2 document the existence of brand flirting and illuminate its defining characteristics and instantiations. Pilot studies 2–3 show that brand flirting is exciting. Study 1 demonstrates that flirting with a competitor's brand causes individuals in committed relationships to anticipate consuming greater quantities of their preferred brand (H1 & H3). Study 1 also confirms that a preferred brand is more cognitively accessible as consumers' commitment to their preferred brand increases. Study 2 finds that flirting with a more similar brand is most likely to increase committed consumers' love of their preferred brand (H3). Study 3 tests our full account: Flirting with a competing brand is exciting, and this excitement is more likely to be transferred to a preferred brand among highly committed consumers and when the two brands are similar (H1–H3).

### Pilot Study 1: the Existence and Scope of Brand Flirting

In pilot study 1, we documented the existence and scope of brand flirting. To this end, we applied a methodology validated by Miller, Fournier, and Allen (2012). Specifically, participants read a description of brand flirting, and described whether they had flirted with a brand.

#### *Participants and Procedure*

In all, 210 MTurk respondents indicated whether they "ever had a short-lived, pleasant interaction with a brand, or thought positively about a brand, but did not feel committed to this brand" (yes vs. no). Next, they listed up to five brands with which they had such an experience, and described the experience that best fit the description of brand flirting in an empty field. They then indicated whether their experience was pleasant (yes vs. no), rated how pleasant it was (1: *Not at all*, 7: *Extremely*), rated whether it elicited guilt (1: *Not at all*, 7: *Extremely*), and indicated whether they had a preferred brand in the same product category as the brand they flirted with (yes vs. no).

#### *Results and Discussion*

*Brand flirting experiences.* We did not analyze responses from seven participants who typed random strings in the response box (because it was impossible to verify whether they had a brand flirting experience). Analysis of the remaining 203 respondents

revealed that the majority (71%) had a brand flirting experience. Respondents who flirted reported briefly enjoying a brand's alluring features (e.g., by considering the features that could be enjoyed from indulging in that brand, or by indulging in that brand) in an uncommitted way, as in these examples:

Images of [Tern] bikes looked great. Everything was positive and appealing. I . . . watched YouTube videos. . . [However] my interest has waned.

Tried it [i.e., Dove soap] and enjoyed it a lot, but. . . [I am] not really interested in trying it again.

Of note, 47% of consumers who flirted with a brand had a preferred brand in the same product category. Although consumers who do (vs. do not) prefer a brand in a product category are less likely to have a positive experience with a competing brand (Jain & Maheswaran, 2000; Raju, Unnava, & Votolato Montgomery, 2009), pilot study 1 demonstrates that a substantial percentage of people nevertheless have had at least one such experience, suggesting that brand flirting is common.

*Motivations.* We conducted an iterative content analysis of the open-ended responses to investigate people's motivations for brand flirting, and identified re-occurring explanations (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Next, two independent raters coded the same open-ended responses to determine the frequency with which these motivations drove brand flirting (see Table 1 for the coding scheme and examples). A Cohen's  $\kappa$  analysis revealed a strength of agreement from moderate ( $>0.40$ ) to substantial ( $>0.60$ ;  $p < .05$ ) for coders' ratings for each of the motivations (except for two, described below). Analysis of coders' ratings revealed that, as in interpersonal relationships, a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations prompt brand flirting (Henningesen, 2004). The most common motivation was attraction to a brand's alluring characteristics (61.6%), mirroring interpersonal relationships in which the most common impetus of flirting is also a target's attractive characteristics (Coombes & Kenkel, 1966). Flirting was sometimes prompted by chance (akin to bumping into a beautiful stranger; 20.0%), browsing (akin to actively evaluating new potential partners; 18.5%), and social influence (akin to being introduced to an attractive other by a friend; 31.9%). The only two motivations with poor interrater agreement ( $\kappa < 0.10$ ) were variety seeking and impulse buying. In fact,  $<6\%$  of consumers seemed to be potentially motivated by variety seeking or

impulsivity, and raters often disagreed about whether even these few instances involved these motivations, which suggests that brand flirting is not primarily motivated by a search for sensorial stimulation or a desire to reduce boredom (McAlister, 1982). This analysis reveals that the impetus that prompts flirting varies—for example, sometimes brand flirting is voluntarily prompted by the consumer him/herself (e.g., a consumer intends to window-shop), and sometimes it is involuntarily prompted by the context or a third party (e.g., a friend introduces a brand to the consumer, who then flirts with the brand). In a similar vein, interpersonal flirting can be initiated by the self or other individuals (Grammer, 1989; Hall, Carter, Cody, & Albright, 2010).

*Emotions.* Participants described their flirting experience as pleasant ( $M = 5.90$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; a rating greater than the scale midpoint of four,  $t(143) = 21.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and as eliciting little guilt ( $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ; a rating lower than the scale midpoint of four,  $t(143) = -18.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). People who preferred a brand in the same product category ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and those who did not ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) described their experience as equally pleasant,  $t(142) = 1.12$ ,  $p = .27$ . People who preferred a brand in the same product category ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) and those who did not ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) also had equally low guilt,  $t(142) = -1.56$ ,  $p = .12$ .

In sum, many people engage in brand flirting. The enjoyment of brand flirting does not seem to be tainted by guilt, which instead often occurs in interpersonal relationships (Paul & Hayes, 2002). This may seem surprising; however, there are differences between interpersonal and brand relationships: While people in interpersonal relationships have altruistic concern for their partner and a normative obligation to maintain their relationship, this is less characteristic of brand relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). In addition, research suggests that when consumers have a preferred brand and encounter—but do not flirt with—a competing brand, their affective response is negative (Fournier, 1998; Raju et al., 2009). In contrast, our findings suggest that when consumers flirt with a competing brand (i.e., when they briefly appreciate a competing brand's alluring qualities without commitment), these negative consequences do not materialize.

### Pilot Study 2: Instantiations of Brand Flirting

Pilot study 1 examined whether our a priori conceptualization of brand flirting resonated with

Table 1  
Pilot Study 1. Why do Consumers Flirt with Brands?

Motivation	Frequency (%)	Flirting was motivated by	Examples
Attractiveness	61.6	Positive, attractive features of the brand	"I got mesmerized with APPLE iPhone 6 plus features, even though I don't have one."
Social influence	31.9	Word-of-mouth or social norms (e.g., band-wagon effect; Leibenstein, 1950)	"A lot of people told me what a great brand it is and that I should try it out."
Marketing	24.1	Sales, promotions, on-time availability, or advertising	"I love chocolate and the Godiva store was offering free samples so I took a couple. I have never bought the brand—I just tried the samples and really liked them." "I saw very glossy, well made magazine advertisements."
Chance	20.0	Happenstance (e.g., the brand was offered at a party, a friend or relative was using it, etc.)	"My sister let me use hers for a few moments. I thought it was pretty nifty." "It was served at a party."
Browsing	18.5	Being on the market for a new purchase or window shopping	"While car shopping, I decided to experiment with several Audi car models even though I knew that I would not purchase one." "Went to the Burberry store at the mall and tried out a few of their classic jackets. Wasn't planning to buy any."
Variety seeking	3.9	Boredom with the current brand or a desire for a new and novel stimulus (McAlister, 1982; McAlister & Pessemier, 1982)	"I wanted to try out many different running shoes. I gave some Nike running shoes a try and evaluated them."
Impulse buying	1.8	Sudden impulse (Rook, 1987)	"Saw the brand in a military supply store and thought, 'cool', and bought the product."

consumers. Pilot study 2 explores how consumers conceptualize their own brand flirting when prompted to apply the metaphor of interpersonal flirting to the brand context, and investigates whether consumers' use of the brand flirting metaphor matches our conceptualization of brand flirting using an approach validated in prior research (Batra et al., 2012). Thus, whereas pilot study 1 examined brand flirting from the top down (from an a priori conceptualization of brand flirting to consumers' own experiences), pilot study 2 examines brand flirting from the ground up (from consumers' descriptions of their brand flirting interactions without the influence of an a priori description of brand flirting). This approach provides insight into aspects of brand flirting that we did not prompt (an approach validated in Batra et al., 2012).

#### Participants and Procedure

In all, 203 MTurk respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.2$ ; 50.6% male) recalled a time in which they flirted with someone; next, they indicated whether they had ever flirted with a brand, and described what happened

and how they felt. Two independent raters blind to the purpose of the study coded whether participants reported flirting with a brand, whether their descriptions matched our conceptualization of brand flirting, and whether consumers who flirted spontaneously recalled positive emotions.

#### Results and Discussion

A Cohen's  $\kappa$  analysis revealed that the coders' ratings for all three variables were reliable ( $\kappa_s > 0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ); thus, we averaged them. Analysis of these ratings revealed that most consumers (66%) had an experience that matched our conceptualization of brand flirting: (a) They appreciated a brand's alluring qualities by either engaging with these qualities (e.g., by considering the alluring qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) and/or actually indulging in these qualities (e.g., using or consuming the brand); (b) This experience was short-lived; (c) They had no commitment to this brand. This percentage is similar to the one in pilot study 1 (71%).

This study further suggested that, similar to interpersonal flirting (Coombs & Kenkel, 1966;

Givens, 1978; Henningsen, 2004), brand flirting occurs in the process of engaging with and/or indulging in the attractiveness of a brand (e.g., “I would look at this skirt several times a day. . . It was extremely cute;” “I tried [the boots] on and it felt great to wear them”) in a brief and uncommitted experience. Moreover, most participants who had flirted with a brand (56%) spontaneously expressed positive emotions although they were not prompted to report them. Participants often mentioned that these positive emotions took the form of excitement (e.g., “it made me feel excited,” “it got me excited,” “it made me excited to think about owning/using it”).

To more precisely assess the prevalence of flirting-induced excitement, we conducted a follow-up study in which respondents (MTurk;  $N = 100$ ; 60.8% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.2$ ) reported whether they had ever flirted with a brand and rated whether this experience prompted excitement (1: *Not at all*, 7: *Very Much*). Respondents who flirted with a brand ( $N = 80$ ) described their experience as exciting ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ; a rating significantly greater than the scale midpoint of four,  $t(79) = 5.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Of note, this result was not driven by outliers; instead, it emerged because a majority of participants experienced excitement—86% of respondents who flirted reported at least moderate excitement (i.e., their response was  $\geq 5$ ).

Interestingly, 27.3% of consumers in pilot study 2 who had a brand flirting experience mentioned a different preferred brand in the same product category to which they were committed (e.g., “I have always been a Nike user but I really got interested in Adidas”). This is noteworthy, as respondents were not prompted to do so. Preferred brands appear to remain in the hearts and minds of some consumers, consistent with our theorizing that preferred brands are cognitively accessible among committed consumers. These results are also consistent with our theorizing that—as with its interpersonal relationship analogue—people flirt with other brands (and people) both when they have and do not have a preferred or stable partner (e.g., Frisby, 2009; Henningsen, 2004; Whitty, 2003). However, we theorize that the excitement that this flirting engenders transfers to people’s preferred brand only when they are committed to it; we test this prediction in studies 1–3.

While most of the brand flirting experiences that consumers described shared the key defining characteristics of brand flirting, analysis of participants’ open-ended descriptions of flirting revealed that consumers flirt with brands in numerous ways, just

as interpersonal flirting occurs in numerous ways (Grammer, 1989; Henningsen, 2004). For example, whether flirting involved a physical interaction with the brand varied (Table 2): for some consumers, merely *engaging* with a brand’s alluring features (i.e., engaging in the consideration of the alluring qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) was sufficient to constitute flirting, whereas for others, actually *indulging* in the attractiveness of a brand (i.e., physically using a brand) consisted flirting. Exemplifying the former instantiation, an Apple consumer felt he flirted with a competitor’s brand when he was fascinated by its alluring features (e.g., he noted that “. . . [Android] had other features that I’ve never had. In the end, the interest was fleeting”). This component of brand flirting is similar to a core component of its interpersonal analogue—a core component of interpersonal flirting is engaging with others’ alluring characteristics (e.g., considering and appreciating others’ alluring qualities; Givens, 1978). Merely engaging with those qualities often prompts excitement (e.g., as occurs when glancing at an attractive other across the bar; Floyd, 2006). We observe similar dynamics in brand flirting (e.g., “just the thought of it made me feel sooo (*sic*) good”).

Exemplifying the latter component, other consumers reported that they flirted with brands by indulging in their alluring features, such as by engaging in brief physical contact—for example, one respondent flirted by “. . . [holding] it and look [ing] at it.” Brief physical touch also can occur in interpersonal flirting. Thus, as with interpersonal flirting (Givens, 1978; Moore, 1985; Symonds, 1972), brand flirting can unfold both with and without physical touch.

In sum, like its interpersonal flirting analogue, brand flirting can unfold in several ways. The operationalizations of brand flirting employed in the current research thus reflect this variety. Also important, consistent with the fundamental characteristics and instantiations of brand flirting that consumers’ experiences revealed, each operationalization shares the three core defining features of brand flirting: (a) Consumers appreciate a brand’s alluring qualities by either engaging with these qualities (e.g., by considering the alluring qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) and/or by actually indulging in these qualities (e.g., by using or consuming the brand); (b) This experience is short-lived; (c) Consumers have no commitment to this brand (see brand flirting conceptualization, instantiations, and operationalizations, in Table 2).

Table 2  
Pilot study 2 and follow-up. Brand flirting examples and operationalizations

<i>Brand Flirting conceptualization</i>	
Both instantiations of brand flirting below share the following three defining criteria of brand flirting: (1) Consumers appreciate a brand's alluring qualities by either engaging with these qualities (e.g., by considering the qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) and/or actually indulging in these qualities (e.g., by enjoying their use of the brand); (2) This experience is short-lived; and (3) Consumers have no commitment to this brand	
<i>Instantiation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
No physical interaction: The consumer engages with the alluring qualities of a brand	<p>"I once saw a new snack food brand at the store. The picture on the front of the package looked really good. I thought about picking it up [ . . . ] It looked really good"</p> <p>"The product was very attractive and in my favorite color [ . . . ]. I felt excited [ . . . ] but I did not buy it"</p> <p>"I looked at a product I considered and really liked the bottle [ . . . ] and general design"</p> <p>"I needed a laptop and it looked very cool. It was very thin, had only one port and it came in gold. It got me excited when I played around with it at the Apple Store"</p> <p>"I recently tried a Keurig coffee maker and I really liked it [ . . . ] I liked how convenient it is and it is fresh for every cup. I [ . . . ] really thought about buying it but didn't"</p> <p>"There were these boots in the window on the way home. They were gorgeous. [ . . . ] I stopped in and pretended I might buy them. I tried them on and it felt great to wear them and they looked great on me"</p>
Physical interaction: The consumer indulges in the alluring qualities of a brand	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Operationalization</i></p> <p><i>Appreciation of alluring qualities of a brand, with no physical interaction</i></p> <p>Study 1. Participants briefly appreciate the alluring qualities of a soda brand in an uncommitted way, but do not interact with this brand</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Imagined physical interaction</i></p> <p>Studies 2–3. Participants imagine a scenario in which they briefly appreciate a brand's alluring qualities during a physical interaction with it.</p>

### Pilot Study 3: Brand Flirting is Exciting

We predict that brand flirting increases consumers' love and desire for their preferred brand because brand flirting produces excitement that consumers transfer to their preferred brand. Pilot study 2 and its follow-up provided initial evidence consistent with the first part of this hypothesis: most consumers feel excitement when they flirt with a brand. Pilot study 3 further tested this hypothesis in four product domains: soda, coffee, beer, and chips. We chose these domains because a pretest revealed that most people have a preferred brand in each.

#### Participants and Procedure

In all, 200 Mechanical Turk participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 31.3$ ; 57.5% males) chose which of two options was more exciting: consuming their preferred brand or trying a different brand that has attractive features (which pilot studies 1–2 reveal is one instantiation of brand flirting) in each of four product categories: soda, coffee, beer, and chips.

#### Results and Discussion

Averaging across all product categories, the majority of respondents (77%) perceived that it was more exciting to try a different brand with attractive features than a preferred brand,  $z = 14.61$ ,  $p < .001$ . This effect also emerged in each of the categories when the categories were analyzed separately ( $p < .001$ ; Table 3). Hence, this study suggests that flirting (in this case, trying out an alternative with attractive features) can be more exciting than consuming a preferred brand.

### Study 1: the Brand Flirting Effect and the Role of Commitment

Study 1 provides an initial test of the brand flirting effect—we predict that people in committed brand

Table 3  
Pilot Study 3 Results

Product category	Other brand vs. preferred brand (%)
Soda	66.10
Coffee	80.90
Beer	79.10
Chips	82.60

Note. Percentage of consumers who believe that consuming a brand with attractive characteristics other than their preferred brand is more exciting than consuming their preferred brand.

relationships more strongly desire to consume their preferred brand if they flirt with a similar competing brand. We theorize that this occurs because flirting-induced excitement is most likely to be transferred to a target that is cognitively accessible, and a preferred brand is more accessible among more committed consumers. In study 1, we thus also test the theorizing that a preferred brand is more cognitively accessible as consumers' commitment to it increases.

Drawing on the instantiations of flirting illuminated in pilot studies 1–2, in this study, we operationalize flirting as briefly engaging with a brand's alluring qualities without commitment to the brand, and without physically interacting with it (i.e., indulging in it).

#### Participants and Procedure

In all, 84 university students in the Netherlands who defined themselves as Coca-Cola (Coke) drinkers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.0$ ; 42.9% male) participated in exchange for course credit. Participants first completed a 5-item scale that assessed their commitment to Coke (adapted from Beatty & Kahle, 1988; Lastovicka & Gardner, 1979). This scale contained items such as, "If Coke was not available at the store, it would make little difference to me if I had to choose another brand" (see Appendix S1—henceforth MDA—for all full scales in this study and in the subsequent studies). Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale (1: *Strongly disagree*; 7: *Strongly agree*). The items were averaged to create a brand commitment index ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to either a *Preferred Brand* condition or a *Flirting* condition. In both conditions, participants rated four positive features of a cola. Specifically, participants in the *Flirting* (vs. *Preferred Brand*) condition rated the extent to which they liked four positive attributes that (allegedly) described Pepsi (vs. Coke; e.g., "Pepsi (vs. Coke) cans are designed to keep your drink fizzy longer than any other cola drink"). Participants reported their responses on 7-point scales (1: *Extremely dislike*; 7: *Extremely like*). The items were averaged to create a liking index ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Participants then reported how much Coke and Pepsi they anticipated consuming in the next week.

Finally, participants completed a lexical task. Letter strings appeared one at a time at the center of participants' computer screen, and they had to decide as quickly and as accurately as possible whether or not each letter string was a brand.



Participants pressed the “Z” key if it was a brand and the “M” key if it was not. After six practice trials, participants started the main task. This task included four Coke related words (Coca-Cola, Coke, Diet Coke, and Coke Zero; each repeated twice) that were embedded in 24 other trials. These trials consisted of four irrelevant brands (Emporio Armani, Giorgio Armani, Armani Collezioni, and Armani Jeans; each repeated twice) and eight strings that were similar to existing brands (e.g., Mart; each repeated twice).

### Results and Discussion

**Liking ratings.** The average liking of the four cola features in the *Flirting* condition ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) and *Preferred Brand* condition ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) were both above the scale midpoint (of 4),  $t_s > 7.29$ ;  $p < .001$ . Thus, participants in both conditions appreciated the attractive characteristics of a brand; however, only participants in the *Flirting* condition positively evaluated a brand (Pepsi) competing with their preferred brand (Coke). We predicted that consumers would more strongly desire to consume their preferred brand when they flirted with (i.e., appreciated the attractive characteristics of) another brand. We test this prediction below.

**Anticipated consumption of preferred cola.** We applied a multiple regression procedure (Aiken & West, 1991) to analyze the anticipated Coke consumption data. A model including only the main effects of condition and brand commitment on anticipated consumption was not significant ( $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(2, 81) = 0.95$ ,  $p = .39$ ); however, adding the interaction between condition and brand commitment significantly improved the model ( $F_{\text{change}}(1, 80) = 7.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The predicted interaction between condition and brand commitment emerged ( $B = 0.67$ ,  $t(80) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ): Consumers committed to Coke (one  $SD$  above the mean of commitment; henceforth  $+1 SD$ ) anticipated drinking more Coke when they flirted with Pepsi ( $B = 1.10$ ,  $t(80) = 2.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as compared to their counterparts who did not flirt; however, flirting did not impact the quantity of Coke that less committed consumers (one  $SD$  below the mean of commitment; henceforth  $-1 SD$ ) anticipated drinking ( $B = -0.37$ ,  $t(80) = -0.95$ ,  $p > .34$ ; Figure 1).

Of note, more (vs. less) committed consumers did not report greater anticipated consumption of Coke in the *Preferred Brand* condition ( $B = -0.29$ ,  $t(80) = -1.67$ ,  $p = .10$ ). We speculate that this null result emerged because baseline weekly

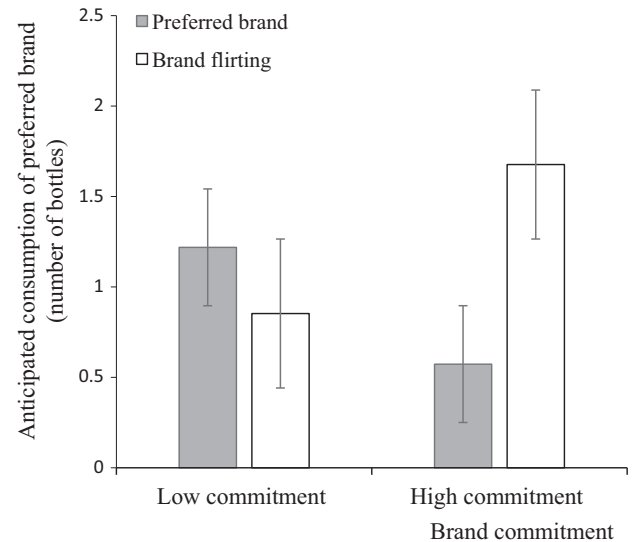


Figure 1. Effect of brand flirting on anticipated consumption of preferred brand in study 1.

consumption was rather low in this sample ( $M = 0.93$ ), which may have made it difficult to detect differences in baseline anticipated consumption. Thus, we hesitate to interpret this null result. Most importantly, and of greatest relevance to the current theorizing, study 1 reveals that brand flirting increases committed consumers’ desire to consume more of their preferred brand (H1). Conversely, brand flirting has no effect on the anticipated consumption of less committed participants.

**Anticipated Consumption of Competitor’s Cola.** A model including only the main effects of condition and brand commitment on anticipated Pepsi consumption was marginally significant ( $R^2 = .24$ ,  $F(2, 81) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .09$ ). Only a main effect of commitment emerged: Participants anticipated consuming less Pepsi the more committed they were to Coke ( $B = -0.88$ ,  $t(81) = -2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The interaction added in the second step of the analysis was insignificant ( $p > .69$ ). In sum, while participants who were more committed to a preferred brand had less desire to consume a competitor’s brand, flirting did not alter this desire. Thus, flirting does not seem to trigger a general desire for cola or a general avoidance of competing brands.

**Reaction Time.** A computer malfunction precluded the collection of two participants’ reaction time data. We first log transformed the data. As in prior research, we excluded outliers that were three standard deviations above or below the mean (Fazio, 1990). Next, we computed the average reaction time for each Coke target word and submitted these data to a multiple regression procedure. The

first model ( $R^2 = .11$ ,  $F(2, 45) = 2.87$ ,  $p = .07$ ) included only the main effects of condition and brand commitment, and revealed a main effect of commitment ( $B = -0.021$ ,  $t(45) = -2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and no effect of condition ( $B = 0.01$ ,  $t(45) = 0.26$ ,  $p = .80$ ). In a second step, we added the interaction between condition and brand commitment, which was not significant ( $B = -0.002$ ,  $t(44) = -0.10$ ,  $p = .92$ ). Also as expected, there were no effects of commitment, condition, or their interaction on reaction time to the control brands ( $p > .19$ ).

In sum, consistent with previous research (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Park et al., 2010), these results suggest that a preferred brand is more cognitively accessible as commitment to it increases. Of course, commitment to a brand is not the only factor that influences its cognitive accessibility (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986; Nedungadi, 1990); nevertheless, study 1 reveals that a brand's cognitive accessibility increases with a consumer's commitment to it.

Consistent with our theorizing (H1), study 1 further suggests that people who are more committed to a brand—and for whom the brand is more cognitively accessible—also anticipate consuming more of this brand when they do (vs. do not) flirt with a similar brand. Study 1 also finds that flirting with a competing brand (vs. appreciating the characteristics of one's preferred brand) does not increase the accessibility of a preferred brand. Thus, indirect priming (in which priming a minor brand can increase the cognitive accessibility of a major brand; Nedungadi, 1990) is unlikely to underlie the brand flirting effect. This finding is consistent with research that reveals that indirect priming does not increase the accessibility of brands that are already highly accessible (e.g., committed consumers' preferred brand; Nedungadi, 1990).

### Study 2: the Brand Flirting Effect and the Role of Brand Similarity

Study 1 provided initial evidence that the brand flirting effect is more likely to occur when individuals who are more (vs. less) committed to their preferred brand flirt with a brand that is similar to their preferred brand. In study 2, we manipulated the similarity of the brand with which consumers flirted, and explored the generalizability of the brand flirting effect using a different flirting manipulation. Drawing on the instantiations of flirting illuminated in pilot studies 1–2, in this study, we operationalized flirting as briefly indulging in the alluring qualities of a brand without commitment

to it. Specifically, participants imagined tasting and enjoying a beverage.

Prior research suggests that misattribution of arousal can increase both desire and love for the target to which the arousal is transferred (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 2000). Study 1 found that flirting-induced arousal can increase desire (e.g., anticipated consumption); study 2 examines whether brand flirting also increases consumers' love for their preferred brand. Not only is the assessment of brand love thus of theoretical import, but it is also practically important—brand love is positively correlated with word-of-mouth and willingness to pay (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005); thus, it has central managerial import, especially in product categories in which there may be an upper limit to consumption (e.g., alcohol, the stimulus in study 2).

#### Participants and Procedure

In all, 419 university students in the Netherlands who self-identified as having consumed beer in the past ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.5$ ; 56% male) completed an in-lab study for course credit. Participants rated their liking of beer and their frequency of beer consumption. Next, they wrote the name of their preferred beer and the names of five other beers, rated the similarity of their preferred beer to each these other beers on separate scales (1: *Very dissimilar*, 7: *Very similar*), and completed the brand commitment scale employed in study 1 ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions—a *Flirting with Similar Beer* condition, a *Flirting with Dissimilar Beer* condition, a *Flirting with Wine* condition, or a *Preferred Brand* condition. In all conditions, participants read a scenario in which they imagined enjoying a beverage, and the conditions varied only in the beverage that they imagined enjoying (see MDA). Participants in the *Flirting with Similar Beer* condition saw the beer that they ranked as most similar to their preferred beer; participants in the *Flirting with Dissimilar Beer* condition saw the beer that they ranked as most dissimilar to their preferred beer; participants in the *Flirting with Wine* condition saw a wine; participants in the *Preferred Brand* condition saw their preferred beer. The *Flirting* conditions contained the defining characteristics of brand flirting that emerged from our qualitative analysis (pilot studies 1–2; see MDA).

Next, participants reported the amount of love they felt toward different beverage brands on three items adapted from prior research (e.g., "I love X,"

*Strongly disagree*; 7: *Strongly agree*; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Bagozzi, Batra, & Ahuvia, 2014; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Participants completed these three items for three brands: their preferred brand, the brand that they identified as most similar to their preferred brand, and the brand that they identified as most dissimilar to their preferred brand. We averaged the three items to create a brand love index for each of the three brands (for all brands,  $\alpha_s > .87$ ).

### Results and Discussion

The results exclude 38 participants who did not have a preferred beer and 72 participants who did not rate five other beers' similarity to their preferred beer. As in study 1, our analysis also includes only participants who like and are consumers of the focal product category (e.g., in study 1: Coke drinkers). Thus, the analysis below includes only beer drinkers, defined a priori as participants who liked beer (beer liking  $> 4$ ) and drank it at least once a month (frequency  $> 4$ ).

A manipulation check revealed that participants perceived the beer in the *Flirting with Similar Beer* condition as more similar to their preferred beer ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than the beer in the *Flirting with Dissimilar Beer* condition ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $t(119) = 15.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We used multiple regression to analyze the love participants reported for their preferred brand of beer. A model including only the main effects of condition and brand commitment was significant ( $R^2 = .19$ ,  $F(4, 226) = 12.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and as expected, it revealed a main effect of brand commitment, such that higher brand commitment was associated with more love for the preferred brand, ( $B = 0.30$ ,  $t(226) = 7.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We did not predict nor observe a main effect of flirting condition ( $p = .74$ )—we predict that not all types of flirting increase brand love; rather, we predict that this effect is more likely to occur as the similarity between the preferred brand and the brand with which consumers flirt increases (H3). Thus, we tested whether an interaction emerged between brand commitment and flirting condition. As predicted, this interaction was significant and improved the model ( $F_{\text{change}}(3, 223) = 3.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Specifically, the relationship between commitment and love did not differ between the *Flirting with Dissimilar Beer* condition, the *Preferred Brand* condition, or the *Flirting with Wine* condition ( $B_s > 0.13$ ,  $t_s(223) > 1.15$ ,  $p > .25$ ). However, committed participants in the *Flirting with Similar Beer* condition

tended to feel greater love for their preferred brand than did participants in the *Preferred Brand* condition ( $B = 0.31$ ,  $t(223) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ), the *Flirting with Dissimilar Beer* condition ( $B = 0.19$ ,  $t(223) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .09$ ), and the *Flirting with Wine* condition ( $B = 0.32$ ,  $t(223) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In fact, highly committed consumers (+1  $SD$ ) in the *Flirting with Similar Beer* condition felt more love for their preferred beer than did participants in each of the other conditions ( $B = 0.45$ ,  $t(227) = 2.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, participants in less committed brand relationships (−1  $SD$ ) expressed equivalent levels of love across conditions ( $B = -0.18$ ,  $t(227) = -1.22$ ,  $p > .22$ ; Figure 2). Thus, only committed participants flirting with a similar brand expressed higher love for their preferred brand, as compared to all other conditions.

Love for the non-preferred beers was unaffected by condition and the interaction between condition and brand commitment ( $p > .24$ ). Only main effects model regressing condition and brand commitment on love for the dissimilar beer were marginally significant ( $F(4, 223) = 2.01$ ,  $p = .09$ ); however, none of the conditions differed from the control condition ( $p > .15$ ).

In sum, study 2 suggests that the brand flirting effect is most likely to occur when individuals in committed brand relationships flirt with a brand that is more (vs. less) similar to their preferred brand (H3).

### Study 3: Flirting-Induced Arousal Mediates the Brand Flirting Effect

Our previous studies demonstrate that (a) brand flirting is exciting (pilot study 3); (b) flirting with a

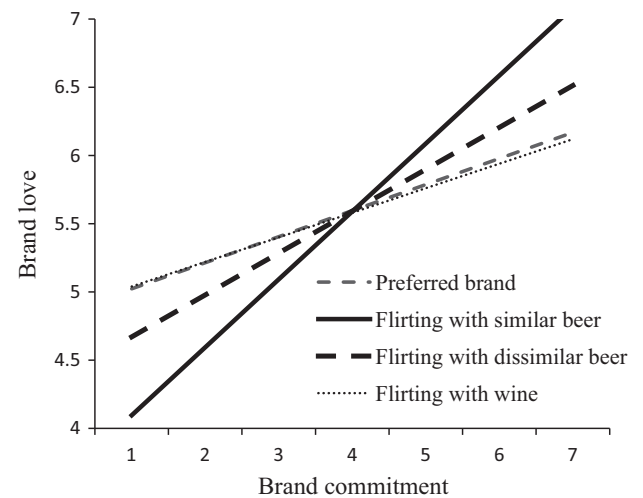


Figure 2. Effect of brand flirting on brand love in study 2. Y-axis truncated at 4.

similar (but not dissimilar) competing brand increases consumers' love and desire for their preferred brand (study 2); and (c) this brand flirting effect occurs only among committed consumers (studies 1–2). These findings are consistent with our theorizing that the brand flirting effect occurs because consumers in committed brand relationships transfer flirting-induced excitement to their cognitively accessible preferred brand. Study 3 directly tests this hypothesis by examining whether flirting-induced excitement (i.e., positive arousal) mediates the effect of flirting on consumers' subsequent desire to consume more of their preferred brand. Because substantial research has measured positive arousal via excitement (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Revelle & Loftus, 1992), we employ a similar measure in study 3. Importantly, while the novelty of an alternative with which people flirt generates excitement, this excitement does not differ as a function of the quality of people's extant relationships (Henningesen, 2004; Staley & Prause, 2013); thus, we do not expect that consumers' commitment to their preferred brand will moderate the excitement generated from flirting.

This study also has a second goal. Because completing a brand commitment scale at the beginning of a study could trigger consistency effects (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995), we examine whether the previously observed effects also emerge when commitment is measured at the study's end. Drawing on the instantiations of flirting illuminated in pilot studies 1–2, in this study we operationalized flirting as indulging in the alluring qualities of a brand without commitment to it. Specifically, participants imagined tasting and enjoying a potato chip brand.

#### *Participants and Procedure*

One hundred eighty-one Mechanical Turk participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.5$ , 48.1% male) completed a study for payment. Participants first reported their preferred potato chip brand as well as their preferred brand in 19 other product categories. Participants without a preferred chip brand and those whose preferred chip brand was Jim's (the brand in study 3's manipulation) or Tim's (a brand similar to Jim's) were screened out of the survey. All of the other participants next completed filler questions, and were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *Flirting with a Similar Brand*, *Flirting with a Dissimilar Brand*, or *Preferred Brand*. In all conditions, participants read a vignette in which they imagined enjoying a brand of chips, and the

conditions differed only in which chip brand participants imagined consuming (see MDA). The flirting conditions reflected the defining characteristics of brand flirting.

Next, participants reported how exciting it would be to consume the described chips on a 7-point scale (1: *Not at all*; 7: *Extremely*). Participants then indicated how many bags of their preferred brand of chips they planned to consume in the next month. After a filler task, participants completed the same brand commitment scale described in study 1 ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

#### *Results and Discussion*

A multiple regression analysis revealed a main effect of condition on excitement ( $F(2, 177) = 3.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ): participants in both the *Flirting with a Similar Brand* condition ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and the *Flirting with a Dissimilar Brand* condition ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) experienced more excitement than participants in the *Preferred Brand* condition ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ;  $t(177) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was no interaction between brand commitment and flirting condition on excitement ( $p > .42$ ). This is consistent with research suggesting that flirting-induced excitement does not differ as a function of the quality of people's extant relationships (Henningesen, 2004; Staley & Prause, 2013); this finding is also consistent with pilot study 3's finding that flirting is exciting regardless of people's preference for a different brand.

Most relevant to our focal theorizing, we predicted that this excitement would be transferred to consumers' preferred brand only when consumers flirted with a brand similar to the one to which they were highly committed. We employed a multiple regression analysis to test this theorizing. The model including only the main effects of condition and brand commitment was significant ( $R^2 = .10$ ,  $F(3, 176) = 6.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and adding the interactions between brand commitment and flirting condition significantly improved the model ( $F_{\text{change}}(2, 174) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Specifically, the relationship between commitment and anticipated consumption was stronger in the *Flirting with a Similar Brand* condition than in the *Flirting with a Dissimilar Brand* condition ( $B = 0.74$ ,  $t(174) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .06$ ) and in the *Preferred Brand* condition ( $B = 1.09$ ,  $t(174) = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In other words, as consumers' commitment to their preferred brand increased, they had greater desire to consume more of their preferred brand when they flirted with a similar brand (versus when they flirted with a dissimilar

Table 4  
 Study 3 Results. Multiple Regressions Predicting Arousal (Model 1) and Anticipated Consumption (Models 2 and 3) in Study 3

Dependent variable	Model 1 Arousal	Model 2 Anticipated consumption	Model 3 Anticipated consumption
Constant	4.79*** (.17)	2.29*** (.32)	2.32*** (.33)
Contrast 1: Similar vs. Preferred Brand	.63** (.24)	.43 (.46)	.33 (.47)
Contrast 2: Dissimilar vs. Preferred Brand	.46 (.26)	.18 (.45)	.17 (.46)
Brand Commitment	.21 (.15)	.23 (.28)	.31 (.29)
Arousal			.06 (.15)
Contrast 1 × Brand Commitment	.18 (.21)	1.09** (.41)	.89* (.41)
Contrast 2 × Brand Commitment	-.08 (.20)	.35 (.39)	.20 (.39)
Arousal × Brand Commitment			.28* (.12)
R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.13	.16

Note. Preferred brand is the base level in these dummy-variable regressions.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

brand or did not flirt). Moreover, and also as expected, the slope in the *Flirting with a Dissimilar Brand* condition did not differ from the slope in the *Preferred Brand* condition ( $B = 0.35$ ,  $t(174) = 0.91$ ,  $p > .36$ ).

Further decomposition of the interaction revealed that highly committed participants (+1 *SD*) in the *Flirting with a Similar Brand* condition anticipated consuming more of their preferred potato chips than did their counterparts in the other two conditions ( $B_s > 1.44$ ,  $t_s(176) > 2.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, there were no differences between conditions among participants with low brand commitment (-1 *SD*;  $B_s < -0.69$ ,  $t_s(176) < -1.24$ ,  $p > .21$ ). In other words, flirting with a brand similar to the brand to which consumers were highly committed increased their desire to consume their preferred brand. Moreover, this effect occurred only when consumers highly committed to their preferred brand flirted with a brand similar to their preferred brand.

We followed the procedures outlined by Hayes (2012) to examine whether excitement mediated the interaction between condition and brand commitment on anticipated consumption (Table 4). Consistent with our theorizing, this analysis revealed mediation among highly committed consumers (95% CI: 0.04, 1.60). This result suggests that highly committed participants in the *Flirting with a Similar Brand* (vs. *Preferred Brand*) condition experienced greater excitement, and that this flirting-induced excitement increased anticipated consumption of the preferred brand. The analysis also revealed mediation among less committed consumers (95% CI: -1.04, -0.002): Less committed participants in the *Flirting with a Similar Brand* (vs. *Preferred Brand*) condition also experienced greater excitement, but

this greater excitement decreased anticipated consumption of the preferred brand. Thus, less committed consumers did not transfer their flirting-induced excitement to their preferred brand; instead, flirting-induced excitement damaged less committed consumers' relationship with their preferred brand, which is consistent with research suggesting that attractive alternatives can harm extant relationships (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

These results support our theorizing that the brand flirting effect occurs because flirting-induced excitement is transferred to a preferred brand among consumers committed to that brand. Indeed, excitement mediated the brand flirting effect when committed consumers (for whom a preferred brand is more cognitively accessible; study 1) flirted with a brand similar to their preferred brand (i.e., under conditions that facilitate arousal transfer).

## General Discussion

This research is the first to document the existence of brand flirting. Like its interpersonal flirting analog, we find that brand flirting manifests in a variety of ways, but these instantiations share the same core characteristics: (a) Consumers appreciate a brand's alluring qualities by either engaging with these qualities (e.g., by considering the alluring qualities that could be enjoyed from indulging in the brand) and/or actually indulging in these qualities (e.g., by using or consuming the brand); (b) This experience is short-lived; (c) Consumers have no commitment to this brand. We also document the consequences of brand flirting: flirting with a similar brand increases committed consumers' love

for and anticipated consumption of their preferred brand.

To test the robustness of the brand flirting effect and to reflect the wide variety of flirting interactions that occur in real life (pilot studies 1–2), we manipulated brand flirting in different ways, including appreciating a product's qualities (study 1) and imagining consuming a brand (studies 2–3). Our findings reveal that flirting increases consumers' desire and love for their preferred brand as consumers' commitment to it increases (studies 1–3), and as the similarity between brands increases (studies 2–3). We also find that the brand flirting effect occurs at least in part because committed consumers transfer the excitement elicited by flirting with a similar brand to the brand to which they are committed. Of course, this process does not preclude the existence of other mechanisms—as with many psychological phenomena, it is possible that more than one mechanism underlies the brand flirting effect.

Our results offer novel insight into the consequences of flirting with alternatives for committed relationships. The availability of alternatives can harm relationships and cause them to dissolve (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003); consistent with this negative view of flirting, previous research has focused on the cognitive and behavioral strategies that committed individuals employ to avoid flirting (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Lydon et al., 2003; Maner et al., 2008). In contrast, we demonstrate that in the brand relationship context, when individuals do not avoid alternatives—but flirt with them—committed consumers can feel greater love for, and desire greater consumption of, their preferred brand. By illuminating this dynamic, our research answers the call for an expansion of the brand relationship literature from a focus on single brand relationships to multiple brand relationships (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Moreover, because disloyalties are frequent in competitive brand landscapes (Brick & Fitzsimons, 2017; Fournier & Yao, 1997), brand flirting is likely a common occurrence even when consumers have a preferred brand; indeed, this possibility is corroborated by pilot studies 1 and 2.

Our findings also have significant practical import. Marketers allocate enormous budgets toward attempts to lure customers away from competitors. While extant research suggests that committed consumers often pay little attention to alternatives (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Raju et al., 2009), our results suggest that even when attempts to gain consumers' attention are successful, this apparent success may backfire by increasing

committed consumers' desire for their preferred brand. If a company is targeting committed consumers, this boomerang effect might be avoided by marketing brands that are clearly different from their competitors. Our research also suggests that creating products that imitate brands to which consumers are committed may be a risky strategy, as consumer interactions with such products may boost their love for the brands to which they are committed.

#### *Related Phenomena and Constructs*

Brand flirting and brand flings share some similarities, but are distinct phenomena. Although both are hedonic and time-bound, brand flings are intense emotional relationships (e.g., involving extreme feelings of love), and occupy much of consumers' time (Alvarez & Fournier, 2012); in contrast, brand flirting involves a fleeting interest in a brand, and requires little investment. Because flings are highly invested relationships, flings result in post-termination negative emotions, which do not occur in brand flirting, where guilt is notably absent (pilot study 1). As with its interpersonal relationship analog, brand flirting can be a safe way to toy with the idea of using a brand, which shields consumers from experiencing negative emotions. Thus, brand flirting and brand flings are conceptually distinct.

Brand flirting also differs from variety seeking. First, variety seeking was rarely a motivation for flirting (pilot study 1). Second, consumers who flirt do not necessarily switch brands, whereas consumers who seek variety often do (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982). Furthermore, variety seeking is unlikely to underlie our results. This account would predict that interacting with any other brand disrupts satiation to a preferred brand, and that flirting with a more different (vs. a similar) brand more greatly reduces satiation (because consuming a more different brand more greatly reduces satiation; McAlister, 1982). In contrast, the brand flirting effect occurs when consumers flirt with a brand that is more similar to their preferred brand; these results are consistent with our proposed arousal-transfer process but not with a satiation account.

The brand flirting effect is also unlikely to be due to flirting-induced threat and initiation of a defensive mindset. Defensive mechanisms in response to threats are accompanied with psychological discomfort and negative affect (e.g., Elliot & Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2000; Tesser, 2000). In contrast, we find that brand flirting does not elicit

negative affect (pilot study 2), but instead elicits positively valenced arousal (i.e., excitement; Chen & Ayoko, 2012; Chumbley & Griffiths, 2006; pilot studies 1–2 and study 3). We speculate that brand flirting does not elicit negative affect and psychological discomfort because brand flirting is uninvested and playful.

Of note, our studies examined the relationship between conceptually similar constructs, such as commitment and anticipated consumption, as well as commitment and love. Although commitment to a brand and desire to consume it are positively correlated, they are conceptually distinct (e.g., Beatty & Kahle, 1988). Commitment and love are also conceptually distinct (e.g., people can be committed without love; Noller, 1996; Sternberg, 1986). Consistent with prior research, commitment is positively related to brand love, anticipated consumption, and choice, in two of our three studies, but these correlations' sizes are moderate or low ( $r < .44$ ).

#### *Future Directions and Conclusion*

We focused on one type of relationship with a preferred brand: committed relationships. However, brand relationships can take other forms (e.g., friendships; Fournier, 1998). Because we find that brand flirting has a positive effect on preferred brands that are highly cognitively accessible, it is possible that brand flirting also benefits other types of brand relationships in which the brand is highly accessible.

One limitation of our research is that we did not investigate the full expanse of brand flirting behaviors—for example, although brand flirting sometimes involves touch (pilot study 2), our participants did not have a real physical interaction with a brand. We encourage future research to examine whether flirting involving real physical touch may heighten excitement and thus amplify our results. The size of the brand flirting effect may also vary as a function of its motivation: whether it is motivated by happenstance or internal factors. If flirting initiates greater excitement when it is initiated by the consumer rather than a researcher, the brand flirting effect may be bigger in the former case than the latter because flirting-induced excitement underlies the effect. We encourage future research to examine that possibility.

Also important, our studies do not examine the full range of differences between interpersonal and brand flirting. For example, although interpersonal flirting sends recipients “inherently ambiguous” signals about their interest (Henningsen, Braz, &

Davies, 2008), the recipients of brand flirting are inanimate objects (which cannot interpret senders' signals). Thus, compared to interpersonal flirter, brand flirter may be less focused on regulating the signal sent to their targets. Future research could examine how this difference in interpersonal and brand flirting alters their consequences.

In sum, the current research provides the first insight into brand flirting. We document its existence and its defining characteristics, as well as the variety of ways in which consumers flirt with brands. We further find that brand flirting can ironically increase consumers' love and desire for their preferred brand. We encourage future research to further investigate the implications of brand flirting on consumer behavior.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Appendix S1.** Methodological detail appendix.